

The Agony of the Campus

THIS is a good time to remember what we owe the students. Owe, not to one or another group and certainly not to the "actions" of last year, but to the fresh and undogmatic young people who in 1963–64 began to assault the injustices of American society.

There were striking moments: busloads of youth heading South to help voter-registration drives, the early teach-ins stirring opposition to the war, the later involvement, at once practical and idealistic, in the McCarthy campaign. At such moments—they seem painfully distant right now—we could glimpse the potential of an aroused generation. The students cast off the cheap tokens of careerism; they shook their teachers out of apathy and made them pay attention to the dangers of a militarized university; they even led their parents to hope that the aborted dreams of *their* youth might yet be realized.

By now, it's mostly gone bad. Though only a part, and far from the best part, of the campus turmoil, the New Left has grown stronger; but it has also become entangled with musty authoritarian dogmas and a nasty cult of violence.

Is there an iron law that makes this decline from idealism to sectarianism inevitable? Must history, especially "our" history, repeat itself?

Seen from an international perspective, it does look as if the changes between 1963 and 1969 had an internal momentum of their own; as if throughout the world there were some fatal tropism to repeat the disasters, the foolishness, the corruptions of the recent past. Yet there are also reasons for the decline that seem special to the U.S.

It is American liberalism, and with it the

labor movement, that must bear some of the responsibility for what has happened. Not all the responsibility, but some. If liberalism had been aggressive and independent in the sixties, even to the extent it had been in the thirties, we would not be facing now the shambles on the campus that we do. You need only compare the electrifying impact of a John L. Lewis with the stupefying impact of a George Meany to understand why no segment of American students finds its moral yearnings and political needs satisfied by the unions.

I will be told that conditions have changed, things cannot be as in the thirties—and that is true. But for a liberal leadership both insurgent and sensitive, the challenge of the sixties could have yielded enormous opportunities. For a labor movement warmly responsive to the poor and the blacks, ready to assert an independent course against militarism and the war, there would have been major possibilities for gaining the friendship of the young. And let no one delude himself: that friendship is worth something, both politically and morally.

Today, when some liberal and labor leaders point, accurately enough, to the destructiveness of recent campus events, one feels impelled to reply:

Yes, of course, but look also to yourselves. Look to the role you played at the Bay of Pigs, look to the monotone of AFL-CIO support for the war, look to the shameful support of the Chicago Democratic convention and the way Hubert Humphrey was chosen. If the kids have turned to the false prophets of left authoritarianism, it is partly because you abandoned them. You gave them no vision of militant idealism as a way of fighting the evils they correctly rebelled against. And if you want to know what might have been,

you need only imagine the support the students gave McCarthy multiplied a hundred times and set into motion behind a united and vigorous left-liberalism. Imagine what that might have done for this country!

II

THE PRESENT CAMPUS TURMOIL is far more extensive than anything we have ever known in this country. Earlier notions that it was the work of a tiny minority skillful at publicity and provocation should simply be dropped. More important than SDS (which nevertheless is larger and reaches into more schools than all the student groups of the thirties) is the fact that major segments of student bodies can be activated for such desirable ends as abolishing ROTC, protesting university involvement with military research, and demonstrating against the Vietnam war. The ideology of one or another student group may be of interest only to the sequestered ranks of the American left; but the political mood of the students as a generation is a fact of major political importance.

III

THE SDS HAS SPLIT. Whether the breakup will carry over into local campuses we do not yet know; but what seems clear, and depressing, is that a once-promising student movement has sealed its eventual doom at the moment of its greatest strength. Again, seemingly, the fatal rhythm of American radicalism: a fresh idealistic start, rapid growth, an abandonment to factional convolutions and absurdities, and then a surrender to authoritarian ideology.

Greg Calvert, former SDS National Secretary, writes in a recent *Liberation* that he has not been able to attend an SDS meeting for the past year, so revolted has he been by what he himself calls "the Stalinization of the Left." Staughton Lynd, polemicizing against SDS, writes: "I am ashamed of a movement which calls policemen pigs. I don't want to belong to it. Similarly, I feel

deeply troubled by the attitude that, since we are right, we can take away civil liberties from others which we insist on for ourselves."

By all accounts the SDS convention in Chicago this summer was a bizarre event, putting to shame even the early Communist sects in the twenties. Two organized factions—one Maoist and the other vaguely Castroite—shout mass slogans at each other, or merely the name of patron saints: Mao Mao Mao and Ho Ho Ho. Overwhelmed by this mutual illumination, they proceed to split, each group denouncing the other as "counter-revolutionary" and "racist." Where did they learn these charming methods?

I remember a meeting arranged in the early sixties between the then leaders of SDS and some *DISSENT* editors. We had read the Port Huron statement and been impressed; but alas, the hoped-for link between radical generations did not occur. Whose fault? Perhaps both. We weren't flexible enough in responding to their rhetoric, they not interested in our experiences that made us uneasy before signs of infatuation with charismatic dictators. Some of the SDS people struck us as admirable; others, like Tom Hayden, the most gifted of the group, already had the bearing of the *apparatchik* about them, speaking of "participatory democracy" but inducing doubt as to how long they'd remain attached to the more commonplace versions of democracy. Still, the differences then were not a fraction of what they have since become.

With its Chicago split, SDS has taken a giant step down the path of earlier American radicalism: the politics of cannibalism, with one split preparing another. The National Office or anti-Maoist group is held together mainly by common antipathy to the PL Maoists; now that the latter are out of the way, the former may discover the range of its internal differences.*

* This very process, the summer interval notwithstanding, seems already to have begun. The *Guardian*, the Guevarist weekly sympathetic to SDS, reports in its July issues a series of further factional battles, including a fairly serious physical

On many campuses, however, SDS—or two groups calling themselves SDS—remains a significant force. In some places the two factions will consume themselves through bitter disputation; in others, they will compete in proving who can be more “revolutionary”; in still others, the local SDS chapter will continue pretty much as in the past, without much concern for the national organization. But anyone who thinks the split removes the political-social phenomenon dramatized by SDS is deluding himself. The alienation of the young runs deep, and much of it is justified. There will not soon be peace on campus.

IV

A MAJOR CRITERION for evaluating campus activities must be their off-campus consequences. Right now student militancy has become a significant force, or symbol, in American politics; every cheap-jack politician of the right sees in campus disturbance an opportunity to gain advantage among the voters. Absolute proof may be hard to come by, but it seems reasonable to suggest that confrontation politics on the campus contributed notably to the victories of backlash candidates in Los Angeles and Minneapolis, perhaps also in the New York primaries.

This is a fact which seems unable to penetrate the mind of Dr. Benjamin Spock. He writes letters to newspapers gleefully noting that confrontation tactics lead to academic reforms, arguing, it should be noted, in terms of effective tactics, not intractable conscience. His judgment suffers from at least one delusion and two errors:

Delusion: that there is an automatic rightness in every demand raised by students, so that if a proposal, say, for a segregated black studies program is called a reform, then it is indeed a reform.

one in New York between PL and National Office groups. The University of Wisconsin SDS has voted not to support either tendency, and according to the *Guardian* there are other such “rank-and-file” rumblings.

Errors: that if certain demands of militant students are granted, this constitutes a political victory—without regard to the possibility that thereby we may have created on the campus conditions that later will be damaging to freedom;

that if certain demands of militant students are granted, there are not going to follow off-campus repercussions that outweigh in disaster the supposed gains made on the campus.

Politics is, among other things, the art of anticipating consequences, and even trying to anticipate unfamiliar consequences. If the recent events at San Francisco State and Berkeley have strengthened the hand of Ronald Reagan (and the polls show his popularity in California to be at an all-time high), then might it not be argued that this is too high a price to pay for campus “victories”? The black studies program at San Francisco State, such as it is, may have been purchased at the cost of subjecting the poor blacks of Watts to four more years of Reagan: does that strike Dr. Spock as a fair exchange?

V

SOCIALISTS—OTHERS TOO—have no choice, I think, but to work for a *liberal course* for the U.S. in the coming period. That signifies:

- *the premise that we are not and will not soon be in a “revolutionary situation”;*
- *the subpremise that if “revolutionary activity” in the next few years comes to more than loud talk, it will have an elitist, desperado and adventurist character;*
- *the belief that it is in our interest to preserve and improve the present agencies of democratic politics, marred as they may be, requiring changes as they do, and even liable to sudden collapse as they are;*
- *the prognosis that the necessary social and economic reforms can be achieved only through a reactivated coalition of left-liberal-labor forces, though one that would be different in political stress and internal*

composition from the coalition we have just seen disintegrating.

I take these statements to be self-evident, and what is more important, I would claim that many of those who attack DISSENT from the "left" actually work from not very different premises. That the realization of this political perspective would not bring socialism and that it is therefore necessary to keep asserting the idea of socialism, is self-evident; but socialism is not, alas, an immediate possibility or issue in American politics. Major social reforms, however, are on the immediate agenda.

Behind these remarks lies the assumption that in the U.S. today liberal values and institutions are in some jeopardy, both from left authoritarians on the campus and, from the far more powerful forces of the right, on and off campus. It is troubling that some of the militant students either take for granted the survival of democratic institutions, or have little sense of how inherently fragile they are, or worst of all, don't believe that in their present form they are worth preserving.

They are wrong, utterly and profoundly wrong. The backlash that has developed thus far is relatively "moderate" and conceived by its spokesmen and supporters as "defensive"; but it has the potential for becoming something far uglier. Democratic institutions need to be defended; their preservation is the absolute condition for the major reforms the country needs.

In campus situations where, in the name of real or alleged reforms, liberal procedures are threatened, either by quasi-insurrectionary methods or a "plebiscitary democracy," we must continue to insist—whether or not it makes us popular—that democracy is impossible without agreed-upon rules (including rules for changing the rules) and that the destruction of such procedures is likely to come at too great a price. If this be called "legalism," then I simply shrug my shoulders and reflect upon the persistence of foolishness in human affairs.

VI

TO WHICH we must add some qualifications:

In speaking about democracy on the campus, it is sometimes said that universities are not "really" democratic. Almost always such remarks point to failures to realize proclaimed democratic values, or to areas in which democratic procedures have not been sufficiently extended, or to areas in which there can be legitimate uncertainty, even disagreement, as to the relevance or applicability of democratic procedures. A few discriminations:

- *If by democracy on the campus we mean the right of students and professors to express and organize in behalf of their political views, then without doubt the American university provides the most liberal and tolerant arena in the whole of our society.*
- *If by democracy on the campus we mean the right of teachers and students to share in university governance, then the situation is very uneven, rather good in some schools and very bad in others. Here reforms are in order, though there may be honest disagreement among radical and liberal professors and students as to which reforms make sense and which do not. In principle, for example, it is desirable to question the powers of boards of trustees. In practice, because of financial and other pressures, it may be necessary to put up with such institutions, while trying to steadily whittle down their powers. But surely on issues of this kind it ought to be possible to make significant changes without either confrontation politics or the ricochet of backlash. Nevertheless, it ought in fairness to be said that student agitation has done a good deal to rouse faculties that had not shown much interest in the rights that ought to be theirs.*
- *If by democracy on the campus we mean the right of students to have equal powers in making tenure decisions and curriculum determination, as well as in deciding the procedures and subject-matter of particular classes, then once more men of good will and democratic inclination can have serious disagreements. Without getting into nettlesome details, I would say that insofar as*

students are members of a community (the university), they should have rights of consultation and should share in the making of decisions—though obviously the university is not a place where one man, one vote is a relevant standard. But insofar as students are learners or apprentices, they submit themselves to the guidance and supervision of those who have mastered the discipline.

To say this is not at all to imply that even as learners and apprentices they have no rights of free speech, etc.; for they surely do. It is to suggest, however, that in the learning situation, majority votes are not, as a rule, decisive. Among other things, teaching means that men who know transmit, pass on, communicate their knowledge to those who do not. This signifies that teachers thereby have a measure of authority, which is of course sharply different from unchecked power. The exercise of legitimate (which must always mean, limited) authority is not necessarily authoritarian. Some students believe that it is; and here, I would guess, we will come to a clash in the university that in a decade or two will be more fundamental than those now taking place.

VII

BARRING A SUDDEN END to the war and major domestic reforms, student unrest seems likely to grow. The positive aspect of this will be that thousands of young people will enter American society determined to put an end to poverty, discrimination, injustice. With a proper joining of circumstances, this could lead to tremendous social gains. The negative aspect is the likelihood, meanwhile, that the kamikaze-style politics of the desperado-totalitarian left will also flourish. In Germany a new student group, the APO, with several thousand members, openly preaches arson, violence, individual harassment, and terror: its declarations sound as if composed by Peter Verhovensky in the pages of *The Possessed*. Is it not possible, or even likely, that some elements in SDS will be driven by a mixture of success and desperation toward similar views? (It is the dilemma of SDS politics that its kind of

success must often lead to desperation.) Once social movements achieve some momentum, they must, so to say, act out their destiny. And one factor likely to speed this development is the readiness of black student groups to use violence, thereby prompting white radical students to escalate their methods of struggle as a way of establishing their "revolutionary credentials."

The politics of Bakunin and Nechaev sprang up in the most backward country of nineteenth-century Europe; they may now be fulfilled in the most advanced country of the twentieth century.

VIII

IT WOULD BE FOOLISH, at this point, to pretend that we have a unified explanation for the character and magnitude of student revolt. The two greatest mistakes are, taking at face value everything the students say about themselves and refusing to accept anything the students say about themselves. The familiar "sympathetic" explanations contain some truth: revolt against bureaucratism, revulsion against the Vietnam war, guilt over draft exemption, concern with poverty, etc. So do the "hostile" explanations: boredom among middle-class youth, purposelessness among those in "soft" disciplines like sociology and literature, delusions as to charismatic dictators in the Third World, abandonment of liberal norms, etc. But when you have so many explanations, then in truth you are still in a preliminary stage of analysis and are still sorting out the relative weights to assign to the various explanations.

Yet there is one aspect of student unrest that ought to be grasped more clearly than it has been by people outside the university. Together with the idealism and despair, there is a growing current of irrationalism and anti-intellectualism. There seems to be some line of continuity between the antihistoricism of the mindlessly contented students of the fifties and the antihistoricism of the passionately discontented students of the sixties. Since the phenomenon is worldwide (see, for

a brilliant quasi-satirical portrait, Godard's *La Chinoise*), distinctively American factors of explanation cannot be sufficient. I think we are experiencing a worldwide cultural revolt against the modernist tradition, with its stress on complexity, irony, ambivalence and the problematical, to which is linked a worldwide revulsion not merely against the industrial-bureaucratic state but the idea of technique itself. The signs of a romantic primitivism are everywhere on the campus, and even those who cannot accept the deeper implications of this trend must admit that some of its external tokens are attractive. I think we are also witnessing, in some strange and inverted way, a quasi-religious impulse which through secular nihilism and alienated idealism seeks to break into a condition of religious transcendence. My own view is that the desire to achieve religious states of being through nonreligious, and especially political, agencies is full of serious dangers, both to religion and society; but let that rest for another occasion.

One immediate consequence on campus of this melange of styles and impulses is sometimes a revolt against knowledge as such. A few months ago I spoke at a university in California before an audience of graduate students, and for two hours I found myself arguing with them—graduate students, mind you—as to whether scholarship had a place in the university! Nor is this an atypical experience. That is why people outside the university ought to be a little cautious in rushing to support everything that a fraction of students or teachers (among whom, by the way, anti-intellectualism is also spreading) declares to be an “academic reform.” One of the leading philosophy departments in the country recently voted to drop the foreign language requirement for its Ph.D. candidates. Is this move a “reform” or an act of panicky submission to current student moods? It will be said, of course, that traditional foreign language requirements for the Ph.D. have been mainly ritualistic and thereby in need of change; which may well

be true, but should hardly lead serious academics to conclude that a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy need not be required to know one foreign language.

IX

WE FACE EXTREMELY GRAVE, perhaps insoluble, difficulties on the campus, and for those of us who believe both in social change and democratic values these difficulties will be especially severe:

- *Much recent behavior of insurgent students goes against the grain. Destroying computers, burning buildings, breaking up meetings, shouting down teachers in classrooms, carrying guns—this has nothing to do with the socialist, or radical, tradition. It is a strange mixture of Guevarist fantasia, residual Stalinism, anarchist braggadocio, and homemade tough-guy methods. This is not the path for serious radicals.*
- *Nor are our objections merely tactical. The kind of “revolution” envisaged by both SDS factions has nothing to do with the large-scale social transformation this country needs. Who, with a reasonable impulse to self-preservation, would care to test out the dispensation of a Tom Hayden or Mark Rudd? Worthy fellows, no doubt; but better powerless.*
- *Our major campus perspective should be to help, whenever we can, the more “moderate” (which these days means liberal-left and radical) students to establish themselves as an independent force. People like ourselves must therefore try to help—not “lead”—like-minded students. Such students are there, and in rather large numbers; what they lack is self-confidence and organizational coherence.*
- *In many universities, faculties have become politicized—at Harvard there now exists the equivalent of a two-party system within the faculty. If by no means an unmixed blessing, this is an undeniable fact; and in any case, for some time ahead we may have no choice. This means the creation of loosely-knit liberal-left blocs of teachers who simultaneously push for genuine reforms (removal of ROTC, no “classified re-*

search" on campus, consultative and participatory rights for students) while firmly resisting violence, disruption, and terrorism.

X

DO WE WANT the university to survive? the university as it is, with all its faults and contaminations?

My own answer is, yes, we want it to survive. Improved, transformed, cleansed—but a university and neither a prep school for militarism nor a training center for guerrilla warfare; a university that serves as a haven for free thought and disinterested (which doesn't mean unimpassioned) scholarship.

A formula: The ideal university would not be subservient to the surrounding society, it would exist solely for the life of the mind and the transmission of knowledge. No university fully satisfies this ideal. None can, either in this or any other society, and perhaps none will in any foreseeable society. The pressures of the containing world cannot, under the best of circumstances, be avoided entirely; but they can be sharply minimized.

The university may be *like* the surrounding society, and one can—indeed, should—legitimately complain that it is too much *like* the surrounding society. But insofar as it is a university at all, it is not *the same as* the surrounding society in its nature, its quality, its ends. If some of our students who have seen the Marxist light were to read basic Marxist texts, they would learn about the autonomy—incomplete but significant—that some institutions can achieve within “the superstructure” of a class society. That autonomy—incomplete but significant—has not been gained easily; it is inherently fragile and open to destruction; and we propose to defend it both against those administrators and faculties who would tie the university to the war machine and those students and professors who would like to transform it into an agency of their political will.

About this matter students have often been confused, and sometimes disingenuous.

(So too have those administrators and professors who see nothing wrong with military research or other contaminating involvements but who, when confronted by student protest, suddenly start mumbling about the autonomy of the campus. If professors really cared strongly enough about university autonomy to promote it on their own, a great part of the energies that now go into campus “confrontation” would be disarmed in advance. As it is, the cry of autonomy is too often used as a shield for indifference.) Students must decide: toward which idea of the university do they wish to move? You cannot behave on the campus as if it were merely a carbon-copy of the external society and then claim the idea of a disinterested and autonomous university as your defense against retaliation. You cannot bring guns onto campus and then grow sincerely indignant when the police are called in. Only insofar as protesters live up to the standards of the university as sanctuary and enclave, can they legitimately and persuasively demand that the other side do likewise. Once you violate those standards fundamentally, you are either engaged in a form of civil disobedience—which, seriously undertaken and warranting serious respect, implies nonviolence and a readiness to accept legal penalties—or in a version of insurrection—which means that you must expect your experiment in force to be met with the crushing reply of force.

Here we must face a frequent student rebuttal: “The university is not really autonomous, you only talk as if it were, that is mere ideological decoration; the campus is caught up with the war machine, it serves imperialism, etc. etc.” This view breaks down into at least two versions: a) that because we live in a capitalist society, the university *cannot* be significantly autonomous, and b) that universities have been allowed by sleepy professors and calloused administrators to drift far from their original or proclaimed purposes and are now seriously contaminated.

The first of these views seems to me not worth taking seriously: it is quatsch-Marxism, an insult to Marx, and of a piece with the argument that democracy isn't real either, because we live under capitalism. The second deserves much more serious consideration, particularly in certain universities. And here I think we must ask our students, and ourselves, whether the American universities are so badly distorted that they no longer serve any educational uses of a significant kind, whether in consequence these universities are worth teaching and studying in, and whether they can be seriously improved short of changing the entire society. (I leave aside the fact that many of those who now speak about changing the entire society have no idea of the university that is worthy of respect and often defend uncritically societies such as Cuba and China where universities are far less autonomous and open to critical thought than the worst of the American ones.)

I believe that the university as we know it remains valuable, first as a repository of learning available to rebels as well as conformists, and probably more useful to rebels than conformists; second, as an agency which increasingly enables plebeian youth to transform its social and cultural condition; third, as a relatively or partially autonomous institution which reflects decades of struggle, both by disinterested teachers within and insurgent movements without, to make education available to all classes. That struggle is far from won, but it would be wanton to dismiss what has been achieved.

XI

WHEN THE ISSUE ARISES of whether to call the police onto campus, it clearly signifies that an earlier political battle has been lost. It is important to say this; but not enough. Politically, tactically, humanely, universities should hold off as long as they can, and then a bit longer, before calling the police;

the experience of most schools where the police have been called indicates that doing so was a mistake. In the coming period we may even have to accustom ourselves to a kind of "dual power" on campus, with a building or two "taken over" by SDS and the remainder of the university going about its business. At times, that may be preferable to handing the SDS the kind of confrontation on which it thrives. But we must also have the courage to declare that once student protest enters the stage of disruption and violence, once it flouts the rights of other students and teachers, we cannot say that under no conditions would we favor calling the police. It is not a happy choice. Sit-ins and even certain kinds of occupations are better than "busts," especially if the university is not totally disrupted and no effort is made forcibly to prevent others from performing their usual academic duties; yet to forgo in advance the resort to authority is to give a free hand to those who would impose the will of a minority through violence and intimidation.

XII

THE SOLUTION to campus problems rests mainly outside the campus. Most students one encounters—greatly troubled, sympathetic with some protest demands, strongly inclined to close ranks against punitive adult authority—remain vaguely committed to liberal values and radical reforms. Valuable energy lies unused here, and all that is needed is an adult movement the young can respect.

That movement, however, isn't likely to appear in the next year or two, and those of us on campus will have to bear the consequences. It will be a test of integrity and fortitude: to succumb neither to fellow-traveling with "the young" nor backlash, but to persist in our devotion to rational discourse, democratic procedures, and radical change.